

# A Personal Reflection on the Importance of International Planning Research, Education and Practice.

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The opportunity to engage in international work in developing countries has been one of the most pivotal events during my 37 years as a McGill Professor as it effectively forced me to completely reconsider all that I had learned up to that point. This happened in 1985 when the late Jeanne Wolfe and I received a “Pilot Seed Grant” from McGill International through a program funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) to develop a research and outreach program in Belize that would include the preparation of a plan for the capital, Belize City.

I arrived in Belize City in August, 1985 filled with excitement and trepidation about encountering a “developing country” for the first time. However, both emotions quickly transitioned into confusion as I saw a dusty street at the entrance to the city that was blocked by two wrecked cars; milling people on narrow, uneven sidewalks; open canals that were intended for drainage but were clogged with rubbish and sewage; chickens eating scraps in dirty ditches along downtown streets; completely dilapidated housing irregularly placed on lots without clear delineation; and almost ubiquitous outhouses in inner city residential areas. Looking back, my confused state was between “Fusion” and “Differentiation”, two of the states described by the philosopher Ken Weber that precede “Integration” as one encounters information that challenges the familiar.

Two activities helped me to differentiate the elements of what first appeared to be simply confusing. First, I read *Beka Lamb*, a novel about a young girl growing up in Belize City that vividly described different sites in the city and, second, I went out to look over the sites in the book, as well as properties that were advertised for sale in the local paper. Gradually, the social and spatial patterns of public and private spaces that had appeared chaotic started to make sense.

On one of these trips I heard happy laughter behind a shabby sheet metal fence and came to realize that at least some of the people living in very poor living conditions were happier with their life than I was with mine. This realization became an implicit research question during my doctoral research in the 90s about the perceived quality of life by residents of hillside informal settlements surrounding Port of Spain, Trinidad and the ways that individuals and community groups strove to move forward. Specifically, how was it that some people living in very poor living conditions could be happier than those in privileged conditions in the “developed world”? What role does planning play in improving the quality of life of people? Did physical planning standards really matter? How could we balance planning standards with planning processes and outcomes that offered individuals and small groups a chance to enhance their own sense of personal efficacy?

As the Belize City project progressed over the next five years many students and other members of faculty, notably Jane Glenn and David Farley, travelled to Belize to complete research projects and contribute to development of a city-wide plan that was essentially a training vehicle for young local aspiring planners and a mutual learning exercise. One of those aspiring planners, Carolyn Trench-Sandiford, is now President of the Caribbean Planners Association.

In the following 20 years we maintained a very active role in international planning research, education and outreach through a series of projects as part of *Villes et développement*, an interuniversity group that collaborated with local partners in the Caribbean Basin and Central America on planning education and research initiatives with support from CIDA. In addition, I have had the opportunity to work as a planning consultant in the region and continue to do so in retirement. Throughout the years, those of us who were involved in these programs sought to integrate the lessons we learned in our courses at McGill in order to convey some of the fundamental planning issues that are not described in the textbooks commonly used in western universities.

All of this to say that there are transitional moments in life, moments when we are challenged to move out of our comfort zone and essentially re-evaluate basic principles so dramatically that our life-path is changed. While in my case, the opportunity to work on international development projects was the catalyst, other people encounter different catalysts for change. The important thing for planners is to embrace these types of opportunities as they free up our minds and help us imagine innovative solutions to planning problems.

For all of these reasons, I feel honored that the School of Urban Planning, McGill University intends to host an Award for Planning Research and Education in Developing Areas in my name. I hope that this award will be supported not only by those who have a specific interest in international development but also those who simply recognize the importance of pivotal moments of whatever kind in the development of planners. With your help, students in the School of Urban Planning will have one more opportunity for mutual learning in a context that challenges their own worldview.